

POP MUSIC REVIEW

Young Returns, Enigmatically

BY ROBERT HILBURN

Times Pop Music Critic

What was that Monday night at the Inglewood Forum?

A road version of "Star Wars"?

Another of Alice Cooper's nightmares?

Actually, it was the return of Neil Young.

Young is one of the most respected, but also erratic, figures in rock, and his first concert here in two years did little to threaten either aspect of his reputation—especially the erratic part. The two-hour show was a daring, sometimes rousing, but also misshapen affair.

Appropriately, a tape of a Beatles song was played just before the 32-year-old singer-songwriter stepped on stage. The night's fascinating blend of outlandish theatrics and assault-rock was indeed a Mystery Tour. The debate will be how Magical the whole thing was.

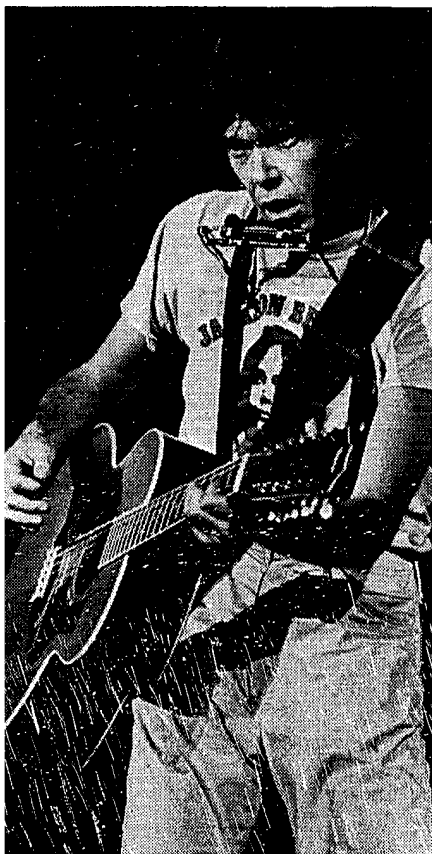
The stage was set—literally—before Young arrived. The props included four huge, brightly colored replicas of the traveling trunks musicians use, and a vacant chariot.

After a painfully loud tape of Jimi Hendrix's version of the "Star Spangled Banner," the road crew shuffled on stage dressed in the hooded costumes and flashlight eyes of the mountain Jawas people of "Star Wars." They placed a 12-foot-high microphone at center stage to go with the other oversized props and then lifted the lid on one of the huge trunks.

Underneath: a sleeping Neil Young. Feigning surprise, he gazed at the audience with all the youthful innocence his Jackson Browne T-shirt suggested. Fittingly, he began singing "Sugar Mountain," a song of almost fairy-taleish calm.

Stepping down from the trunk/platform, Young looked like a scene from "The Incredible Shrinking Man" as he stood next to the huge prop microphone. Equipped with a

Please Turn to Page 13, Col. 1



CHANGE OF PACE. Neil Young brought props and Jackson Browne T-shirt Monday.

Times photo by Dave Gatlley

NEIL YOUNG

Continued from First Page

portable microphone, Young, accompanied only by his own acoustic guitar, sang his early "I Am a Child."

The tune and the Romper Room/toybox set design underscored the sense of innocence. As the show proceeded and Young was joined by the three-piece Crazy Horse band, the mood shifted to a much harder, troubled stance.

With the music pouring out of the speakers in the second half with enough volume to crowd ear specialists' waiting rooms this week, Young's concept, however hazily, touched on the loss of idealism—both in rock 'n' roll and in the individual.

Moving around amid the giant props, he seemed a man overwhelmed by the vast machinery that has sprung up in pop music since the early days of rock. In the second half, however, the fury in his music and themes suggested Young was a survivor.

The show's dominant theme was the triumph of the individual. It's better to take chances than to slip safely into a rock 'n' roll old age, the music suggested. In a new tip of the hat to the Sex Pistols' Johnny Rotten, Young even summarized that idea: "It's better to burn out/Than fade away." To make sure no one missed the point, he repeated the song during the encore.

At the end, Young was joined at the front of the stage by the cast for a bow that looked straight out of "A Chorus Line." There were even blinking theater lights at the edge of the stage as he acknowledged the audience's cheers.

In the parade of special effects and teasing concept threads, the music seemed lost at times. The opening, acoustic 35 minutes, however, worked well. Young's distinctive mix of gentle and intense elements remains one of the most enticing in rock. He has a narrow, delicate vocal range but the limitations help convey the search and inde-

pendence of his music.

The subtleties and balance in Young's music, however, were all but shattered in the 75-minute electric segment with Crazy Horse. The volume was so high and the sound separation often so minimal that the music came across as a blur—a virtual jackhammer assault.

Young's 1976 shows with Crazy Horse at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion and Forum were a far more captivating hookup with hard rock. Measured against the urgency and obsession of those sirenesque guitars and haunting interludes, Monday's mood was more controlled and one-dimensional.

Once a symbol of the serious, no-nonsense folk-rock stance of the 1960s, Young has attempted to adjust to the chaotic rock scene of the late 1970s. Even if the show was unwieldy, it showed him to be a man of ideas and very much an artist still in motion. Young's six-week U.S. tour ended with a second Forum show Tuesday night.